

Sir,—

Department of Lands and Survey, Wellington, 5th August, 1924.

I have the honour to submit herewith the annual report on the settlement of Crown land for the year ended 31st March, 1924.

I have, &c.,

J. B. THOMPSON,

Under-Secretary.

The Hon. A. D. McLeod, Minister of Lands.

REPORT.

REVIEW OF PAST YEAR.

THE past year has, on the whole, been a satisfactory one from the farmer's point of view, and much steady progress has been made. Perhaps the outstanding feature of the period was the remarkable success of the wool-sales held in the Dominion. Overseas buyers were strongly represented, competition was exceedingly keen, and values reached the prices obtained under the commandeering, each succeeding sale appearing to afford evidence of a yet firmer market. Local mills competed freely with foreign buyers for the finer wools; but the most pleasing feature was the remarkable rise in value of the coarser wools. The result of the series of sales was altogether satisfactory to the sheep-farmer, and the extra value to the whole Dominion of the season's wool-clip will be a potent factor in the revival of the pastoral industry. Lamb and mutton values have also generally been well maintained, and altogether the pastoral industry has experienced a profitable year. There has been a substantial increase in the number of sheep in the Dominion, as on the 30th April, 1923, there were 23,081,439, whilst on the 30th April, 1924, it was estimated that there were 23,584,789, showing an increase of half a million.

The volume of dairying products has again been well maintained, and, despite a fall in prices and a somewhat fluctuating market, this industry continues to expand and to hold its high position amongst the producing and exporting industries of the Dominion. No other branch of farming offers a surer means for the settlement of a large rural population, and a strong and healthy dairying industry is essential to the progress of subdivision and settlement. Strong competition from other dairying countries must be faced, and can best be met by improved farming methods and a more rigorous culling of herds. A tendency has been noted in many cases for dairy-farmers to revert to sheep, either wholly or partially, and this is a matter that demands careful watching. In those cases where farmers kept a few cows to supplement their returns it is no doubt natural that, now wool and mutton are on a more payable basis, they should wish to return to sheep; but it is inadvisable to use first-class dairying-land for sheep-grazing only.

The beef-market has not been altogether satisfactory. A considerable number of North Island cattle, drawn principally from Wellington Province, were shipped to Melbourne, and this had the effect of bringing about a temporary improvement in local values, which, however, was not maintained for any length of time. The demand for store cattle has been poor; but there are signs of a shortage and a permanent rise in prices.

Unfortunately, the year was not a good one for agricultural operations. A wet autumn and winter greatly reduced the cereal area, and the yield both of wheat and oats has been below the average. The rainfall was unevenly distributed, and in addition crops in Canterbury were subjected to the most severe north-westerns experienced for many years.

Disastrous floods occurred during the autumn of 1923 in Marlborough, north and middle Canterbury, and in portions of Otago, notably the Taieri Plains. Roads and bridges were extensively damaged, and the flooding of large areas of agricultural and pastoral lands resulted in severe losses to the farmers concerned, though fortunately the stock mortality was not unduly high. Early in March last the district surrounding Napier experienced a phenomenal rainfall, resulting in a serious flood, details of which are given in the special report on Hawke's Bay.

An exceptionally heavy snowfall occurred during August in parts of the Otago and Southland back country; but the losses in sheep were fortunately not so severe as at first anticipated. This snowfall, so far as Southland is concerned, is the subject of a special article in the report (see Appendix V).

The problem of unpaid rents has again been a serious one, and has occasioned much anxiety; but the position will be much improved when the revaluation of soldier holdings has been completed. The whole subject is dealt with more fully under its appropriate heading.

Crown tenants now on the books of the Department number 35,734, occupying an area of 20,226,633 acres. A large proportion of this area is held under pastoral tenures in the South Island. No